



Assamese Language in the Light of Census

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Findings

Abstract

In this study, the reports and tables on languages in Assam from the census are analysed and compared with the demographic changes in the population structure to find out the probable factors responsible for dispersion and decline in the number of Assamese speakers. The language data of censuses before independence is marred with discrepancies. Some of the reasons for the same have been cited in this paper. The census data from 1991, 2001, 2011 has been compared and an interesting increase in the number of speakers between 2001-2011 has been analysed.

Introduction

Assamese is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language evolved from the middle Indo-Aryan Magadhi Prakrit. The eighth schedule to the Indian Constitution recognises Assamese as a scheduled language. It is native to Brahmaputra Valley with a strength of 15,095,797 speakers according to 2011 census. The fluctuations in the strength of Assamese speakers have indirectly portrayed the ethnic distribution and demographic changes over the years in Assam.

System of the decennial census was established in India in 1872. However, data on Languages were collected only from the first synchronous census of 1881. In 1881 and 1891 only data on mother tongue was collected. 1901, 1911, 1921 censuses had question reflecting the language ordinarily used. It was from 1931 census that data on mother tongue along with bilingualism and trilingualism was incorporated. Data on language was not collected in the 1941 census. In 1981 census was not conducted in Assam due to the separatist movements.

Objective:

- 1) To study the reason for discrepancies in the language data of the census of Assam before independence.
- 2) To provide reasons behind the fluctuation of the proportion of Assamese speakers and decadal growth of the number of speakers.

Method and Data used:

The study is descriptive in nature. The data collected is from the decennial census of Assam from 1881 to 2011 (excluding census of 1941 and 1981).

Table 3: Distribution of Assamese speakers according to census 1991, 2001 and 2011

Census Year	1991	2001	2011
Assamese speakers in India	1307806	13,166,484	1531351
Assamese speakers in Assam	1295808	13,010,478	15095797
Percentage of speakers in Assam	99.07	98.80	98.59
Assamese speakers in the Other States	121608	155,006	215554
Percentage of speakers in the Other States	0.93	1.19	1.41

The percentage of Assamese speakers outside Assam has doubled since 2001, this shows that Assamese is gradually dispersing from it's localised form. It will take another decade or so to see the language attrition in the Assamese speaking diaspora due to second language acquisition.

Decadal variation in Assamese speakers' strength from 1881 to 1931

The report on the census of Assam for 1881 mentions some of the grammatical, lexical and phonetic differences between Assamese and Bengali. From the numerical statistics, it's quite evident that the use of Assamese was confined to the Brahmaputra Valley, and was not very common in Goalpara. Omitting Goalpara the proportion of Assamese speakers in the valley was 70.3 per cent in 1881. The General Report on The Census of India 1891 (pg144) denotes that a possible reason for the successful establishment of Assamese as a separate language was due to the political separations of the Assam province from Bengal. It further mentions the linguistic differences between the two provinces as "...for the tongue of the eastern and northern districts of Bengal bears scarcely greater resemblance than Assamese to the euphuistic speech of Calcutta and Nadiya". It also hints the localization of Assamese language in its native valley.

The language figures of the census for the year 1881 and 1891 are heavily impaired by mistakes during enumeration and classification.

Census of Assam 1901(Pg 87), the report on languages spoken in Assam throws light on the discrepancies in the language figures collected during the enumerations. Since the enumerators had a very vague idea about the languages spoken in India any foreign language spoken by the respondent was either recorded as Bengali, Deshwali or according to the birthplace of the respondent.

A major factor that makes the data on Assamese speakers unreliable is the bilingualism among the people residing in the Brahmaputra valley. All the aboriginal tribes residing in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley spoke Assamese in addition to their own tribal lingo, and it was to some extent a matter of chance which of the two is entered in the schedule.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons return of languages weren't accurate due to the ambiguity in recording the language spoken by the immigrants, especially the tea tribe population. "It is usually a patois picked up on the garden which recruited them and has a vocabulary made up of Hindi, Bengali and Assamese words in proportions varying according to the tea district and to the district of recruitment: Hindi predominants in Lakhimpur, but in other districts the number of Assamese words increases westward and eventually the dialect becomes Assamese with a mixture of Bengali or Hindi words." (Pg 97, Census of India, 1911 volume III, Assam)

Table 1: Proportion of Assamese speakers from 1901 to 1931 in Assam

Census Year	1901	1911	1921	1931
Proportion of Speakers	22.03	21.71	21.6	21.57

A peculiar scenario was seen in Goalpara district. From 1881 there had been a decline in the number of Assamese speakers in the district till 1901, but 1911 census recorded a sudden surge. This led to an enquiry and rechecking of the district schedule. According to the Linguistic survey, the dialects of western and south-western Goalpara is pure Rajbanshi, a Bengali dialect; while in the eastern part the dialect is western Assamese (Assamese mixed with Rajbanshi Bengali). It was found that the language of the Hindus in the east of at least Dhubi Subdivision was shown as Assamese mixed with Bengali and was recorded as the latter in the census of 1901, while it was classed as Assamese in 1911 following the advice of Sir G Grierson. It was discovered that returns were manipulated to show less Assamese speakers and more Bengali speakers than really existed in the census.

The decline in the proportion of Assamese speakers was attributed to two causes:

- 1) More accurate enumeration of the languages of tea tribes.
- 2) Increase in the number of immigrants - from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Madras as tea garden employees, from Eastern Bengal as agricultural land settlers and from Nepal as livestock farmers.

However, the census of Assam 1931 dismisses the fear of Assamese being overshadowed by other languages as- "the language had no danger of suppression and that the Assamese are determined to preserve their language".

Decadal variation in Assamese speakers' strength from 1951 to 1971

The quality of data has been improving post-independence. A clear definition of mother tongue along with instructions to accurately record the language data was incorporated in the census of 1971. Census of India 1961(Volume III, Assam) recorded mother tongues according to the classification provided by Linguistic Survey of India (Table C-V). The problem created due to bilingualism in previous censuses were tackled painstakingly since 1961 census. The data on bilingualism and trilingualism paints an apt picture of linguistic boundaries along with a subtle idea of how one language impinges the other.

Percentage of Assamese speakers in the country has been decreasing from 1971 to 2011 in spite of the increase in the absolute number of speakers. It was 1.63 in 1971, 1.56 in 1991, 1.28 in 2001 and 1.26 in 2011. Since the census doesn't provide the age distribution of speakers, it's not possible to estimate or predict accurately the natural growth of the number of speakers. The number of speakers is increasing with each census thus the decline in the speakers' strength is due to the increase in speakers' strength of other languages and emigration of Assamese speakers.

Table 2: Assamese speaker strength from 1951 to 2011 in Assam

Census year	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Number of speakers	4,971,229	6,784,271	8,065,544	**	12,958,088	13,010,478	15,095,797
Proportion of Speakers Decadal growth	56.29	57.14	59.53	**	57.81	48.81	48.371
		0.3647	0.3127	**	**	0.0040	0.1603

The Assamese Official Language Bill passed in 1960 installed Assamese to its rightful place and this influenced the increase in the number of speakers since 1961. This was obviously because a large number of Bengali and other non-Assamese people turn Assamese as their mother tongue. (Ahmed: 122)

A few minor influences because of fragmentation of Assam to form new states is noteworthy.

- 1) In 1963, the Naga Hills district became the 16th state of India under the name of Nagaland.
- 2) The Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 accorded autonomous status to the state of Meghalaya. The act came into effect on 2nd April 1970, and Meghalaya was formed by carving two districts the Garo hills and the united Khasi hills and Jaintia hills from Assam.
- 3) The census of Assam had included the Mizo hills for the last time in the year 1971. The region was converted into a union territory in 1972 and later declared as a full-fledged state in 1987.
- 4) In 1972 North Eastern Frontier Agency was separated from Assam as a union territory. It was later renamed as Arunachal Pradesh and given the status of a state.

Table 4: District wise distribution of the number of speakers according to 1991, 2001 and 2011 census.

District	Decadal Growth 1991-2001			Decadal Growth 2001-2011		
	1991	2001	2001-1991	2001	2011	2011-2001
State - ASSAM 18	1295808	13010478	0.46303474	13010478	15095797	0.45799887
Morabari	178135	181858	3.92324817	181858	210556	16.8902286
Dhubri	305016	1147480	13.8893433	1147480	1792547	12.44888273
Goalpara	367053	380192	1.57952048	380192	522334	37.38889075
Bongaigaon	398955	385516	-1.16758893	385516	441133	15.3845058
Barpeta	868195	774225	-10.82300543	774225	731881	-5.47103812
Kamrup	1448154	1619713	11.86936496	1619713	1974655	21.9015707
Nalbari	727388	777385	6.80580889	777385	782238	0.641810582
Garung	889577	985058	11.25147372	985058	645793	6.641126355
Majuli	520189	513274	-1.32805457	513274	699114	35.47830254
Nagaven	1281700	1393817	9.88920373	1393817	1749121	27.31184517
Sivasagar	779151	561048	-27.89838326	561048	498888	-23.47504128
Lakhimpur	688075	474877	-31.0005384	474877	482892	-27.23228713
Dhemaj	218517	229792	5.21477813	229792	261895	17.08182803
Tinaiyaka	561826	581836	3.61810538	581836	638861	9.09428612
Bongaigaon	839461	878173	2.24812087	878173	1008384	14.79088013
Sivasagar	838803	869155	1.28846827	869155	969892	12.04514605
Udalgurj	738192	814397	10.92299161	814397	911100	11.8880811
Golapata	696459	736469	5.73845803	736469	838426	13.175607
North Anglong	44911	82135	36.1031817	82135	77952	-10.48878466
North Cachar Hills	6500	5006	-11.51029511	5006	4852	-26.16126311
Cachar	18611	95161	51.30145111	95161	78811	-16.12082113
Kamrupam	2701	4001	48.41584813	4001	3033	-29.51429213
Lakhimpur	688	1461	109.1888913	1461	777	-46.38124813

In spite of having a low decadal growth rate from 1991-2001, the decadal growth has been highest in Goalpara during 2001-2011. Another surprising finding is the decadal growth rate of Morigaon; from a negative growth rate of -2.63, the present decadal growth rate has increased to 35.67. Since 1881 Assamese wasn't spoken by the majority in Karbi Anglong, North Cachar, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Negative growth in these districts shows that increase in education, socio-cultural and linguistic awakening has instilled a sense of courage and pride in people and they are returning their mother tongue more accurately.

Assamese as a language has a life span which is entirely dependent on its use in administration and education, number of speakers and language attrition due to second language acquisition. It's the proportion, not the absolute number that has been declining.

References:

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